

Robson's Reader

JOHN MARTON "read" for the publishing-house of Robson. As a judge of fiction John Marton was possibly unsurpassed, but as a discoverer of genius in manuscript, the most difficult and delicate of all discoveries that mortal man can attempt, he was practically unequalled. John Marton could discover a novel for you, and a possible novelist, too, even disguised under the worst handwriting and most irritating ignorance of the mystery of "paraphrasing" that ever taxed the limping patience of the publisher's reader. Yet John Marton could not write a novel for you himself. No, not a line. He knew it, too. And it cannot be denied that even the kudos of his position with Robson failed to entirely console him. But John Marton was a sensible man. He took the handsome salary which Robson paid him, and with that and his critical work in the best reviews made himself content and gave up crying for the moon. His position in letters was high, his income was good and increasing. This of late had become a most important consideration. The most important, perhaps—so important as to push even his regret as an unavailing novelist entirely to one side. For John Marton was in love—very much in love—and he had just been able to persuade the object of his affections to accept his love; further, to admit that she would take the possibility of marrying him—some day—into consideration. Further than that he had not attained yet.

But in truth the object of his affections was rather the subject of his affections. At least she was that sort of a girl who never, on principle, allows a man to be quite sure of her. Wherefore man usually debases himself before that sort of a girl, presumably that he may prove to her that she may be quite sure of him. This lady love of John's lived in New York. Her father was a stockbroker and had a house on Riverside drive. Alina was her name, and besides being the daughter and living on Riverside drive and having John to fall in love with her, Alina was literary. Alina wanted nothing so much at present as to be a "literary celebrity." Not even a liberal dress allowance or all the pleasing round of gayety which naturally follows upon a proper dress allowance and a house on Riverside drive, may, not even the subject matter of that distinguished man of letters, John Marton, was enough for Alina. No, Alina soared far above such insignificant trifles as that.

Alina meant to write her name upon the age. That was how she expressed it to herself. But she began to write industriously, and had been so far successful that she had three or four short stories printed in one of the magazines. Such was the point to which she had attained when John Marton laid his heart and hand at her feet, while she, with small tokens of her beautiful "waxed" head, had intimated to the owner of those articles that she would consider what she would do with them. But she by no means intended to remain at that point in what she was pleased to call her literary career. Oh, dear, no! And she took an opportunity of saying as much to John. The result being that one fine day John walked away from the house on Riverside drive with his love's valise and suitcase ringing by no means quite pleasantly in his ears. "And if you don't recommend Robson to publish it"—this was his love's valediction—"I will never speak to you again as long as I live."

And the worst of it was, as the unfortunate John knew only too well, that she was perfectly capable of carrying out that threat to the uttermost letter.

He went back to his hotel wishing he could get typhoid or smallpox, or anything that would effectually debar him from reading the MS. that was coming to him. But none of those agreeable methods of escape was good enough to present itself whereas the MS. did, duly wrapped in brown paper and in company with three others and a polite note from Robson.

With cowardly sinking of heart he left it to the last, and read the three others that had been sent with it first. The first was a novel, the second bore no author's name whatever, but the style was unknown to him. It bore the title, "A Human Heart." So far as he knew, he had never read anything from the same pen, Robson mentioned no name, but called it the work of a new writer. It was typewritten, as they all were.

John Marton read it carefully, though all the time the undercurrent of his thoughts was with Alina's MS. lying there before him. But he was sufficiently wide awake to know what "A Human Heart" was worth recommending, and he did recommend it—cordially for him—tempered, of course, with certain recommendations to be carried out before publication. He took as long over this as he could, but do what he would the evil moment had to be faced.

He took up Alina's neatly typewritten manuscript at length with a hand that shook so much that he grasped the manuscript quite roughly.

"A Thing of Love," by X. John's glancing eye fastened upon the letter X. "I mean merely to put 'X' in the title page," Alina had declared to him. "I have noticed that when things are written by 'X' they always attract notice. Besides, strict anonymity is always good for a new writer. People always read a book if they don't know who it's by. But, of course, I can tell all my friends—privately."

And it is to John's credit that at that point he did not smile—not even when she added deliciously, "Besides, I particularly wish the book to stand or fall by its own merits only, so of course I shall be strictly anonymous."

And the first step to letting it stand or fall on its own merits, in her opinion, apparently, was to do all she could to corrupt the publisher's reader. John shook his head as he remembered that now.

"O Alina! O woman!" And then reluctantly he addressed himself conscientiously to "A Thing of Love."

Well, it might be a thing of love, but it was certainly not a thing of merit. John Marton could have no doubt about that, none at all. As to Robson publishing it, impossible. Not that it had not some excellence, but it was excellence of a sort. Assuredly not Robson's sort. One couldn't ask Robson to publish that sort of thing. Nevertheless, bits of it were bright, and there were touches that reminded him of Alina.

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But no. When he concluded the second reading he believed that it was only by strenuous effort that he had accomplished the feat. He hung the beautifully typewritten piles of MS. from him with an oath. He felt at his wits' end. He sat staring at his shoes and swearing softly as a sort of temporary relief. What on earth was he to do?

Recommend it to Robson? Only the woman who had written it could have imagined Robson publishing it. What was any poor fellow in his predicament

to do? Oh, it was maddening, monstrous!

Oh, why had he ever become Robson's reader? Why had he ever thought it his duty to inform Alina's father of that fact? Why had his mother taught him to hate lies? Why, in addition to that, had he been endowed with instincts that rendered it impossible for him to cheat his employers? Why could he not tell a lie or two and coax Robson into publishing the thing? Why had he fallen in love, and why was Fate so unkind as to doom him to love a girl who only wanted to write novels? Why does any charming girl want to write novels which nobody ever wants to read? Why had he not taken courage like a man and pointed-blank declined to read Alina's MS. at all. That was what a man would have done.

His brain reeled. What was he to do? Offer Robson untold sums of money to bring the thing out? Robson was incorruptible—everyone knew that. It was the price of the great feature of the great house. Confide in Robson? Robson was a very good friend; but no, he could not exhibit his heart to the cool glare of Robson's clear, calm eyes. Still less could he exhibit Alina's incompetency.

No, there was nothing to be done. Except, indeed, the one thing which he must perforce do, namely, return the thing to Robson with the other manuscript and the reader's opinion upon it and that of him.

He did not dare to go near Alina during the interval that ensued, even though he positively ached to see her. The moment would come soon enough; there was no need for him to anticipate it. There was not certainly, for it came one morning in an amazing rapidity, borne swiftly upon the wings of a telegram, which said in Alina's pretty, imperious fashion:

"Come today at half-past four. Most important."

Then John gave himself up. Robson had doubtless replied to her about the book. He might have known that it was always Robson's practice to put you out of pain quickly.

All was over he felt convinced. Nevertheless he dressed himself for the visit very carefully.

He lingered, he dawdled. But let him linger and dawdle ever so, yet Riverside drive was reached at last. He rang the bell with the desperate courage of despair, and his heart went down to the soles of his polished boots before he knew where he was. He was following the maid up the stairs. But suddenly he realized that she was not taking him to the parlor. No, he was being conducted, of course, by special orders, to his love's own sitting room. "The Lord help me!" said the despairing John.

Then the door was flung open, and he was in the room. And his love—well, it would not be correct to say that she advanced to meet him, for as a matter of fact she danced, literally danced, and Alina was so used to seeing John come home, or even think she had laid her hands on his shoulders and looked up at him with a dazzling smile.

"Jack," she said, all in one breath, "where on earth have you been all this time, and why haven't you been to see me, and I've wanted so to see you, and you're looking very nice, and if you think you'd care very much, why, you may give me—er—er—kiss."

He did more, for he gave her three on the spot, though he did feel dazed and stupid. Indeed his generosity was such that he would have given her still more had she not promptly refused to have them at present.

"Come and sit down," she said severely, "and try not to be silly."

And John went and sat down and tried to be wise. It was not easy by any means when he happened to be sitting on a sofa with Alina beside him.

"Now!" cried his love, drawing a long breath, and drawing with it also a letter from her pocket.

John nearly groaned aloud. Only too well he knew Robson's pale-blue envelopes, with the stamp of a great house on the flap at the back.

Again his brain reeled. But his love was commanding his attention, and when she commanded, why, there was nothing left for him but to obey.

"Listen!" she cried, imperiously.

And John listened accordingly, or tried to, with his brain confused.

"Dear madam," read Alina, clearly, with what seemed to him a positively cruel emphasis on every word, "we beg to inform you that we have now carefully considered the manuscript which you were so good to submit to us recently. In consequence of the opinion expressed by our Readers—our Readers," repeated Alina, and she gave "our Readers" arm a little passing squeeze—"upon it, we shall be happy to bring the book out, only stipulating that some slight alterations and suggestions which our Reader has made be embodied before we send the manuscript to press. It is our practice either to purchase the copyright outright for a sum to be agreed upon hereafter or to publish on the royalty system—the author retaining the copyright and receiving a percentage, also to be agreed upon, upon sales. If you will kindly intimate to us your willingness to accept an offer from us for the book, based upon either of the foregoing, we shall have the pleasure in drafting a formal agreement and transmitting the same to you without delay, for your signature. Awaiting the favor of your reply, we are, dear madam, yours faithfully,

"Henry Robson & Son."

Alina paused, drew a long breath, and looked at her lover. Her lover drew several long breaths and did not look at her. She tossed her head triumphantly.

"Now," she cried, and a less adoring person than John could have forgiven the exultation in her voice, "now what do you think of that?"

That was precisely what John Marton did not know. The whole letter was a sort of cryptic anagram to him at that moment. But the natural cunning of man came to his aid. The instant resolution which his mind adopted was to lie low and wait for the explanation which he felt was bound to come speedily. For given an anagram, and a woman with the key to it, and it does not take much special knowledge on the part of man to foresee the result.

John Marton contented himself with a policy of masterly inactivity. He wished to let Alina say it all. Alina, to do her justice, was nothing loath.

"Really," she said, and she looked at her lover out of the corner of her eyes. "It was rather clever of you, Jack, and she leaned a little toward him as she said it.

"I have no doubt it was," thought John, "if I could only find out what it was." But he said nothing aloud; only he took the opportunity to slip his right arm round Alina's waist.

"You see," she continued, with a

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charming emphatic gesture, "I like to mystify people."

"That's true," thought John.

"But, oh, Jack," she turned her face up toward him and smiled into his eyes, "don't you guess why I had done it?"

"Heaven help me," said John to himself, "for this is beyond me."

"Well, you see," she said, "it may seem odd, but er—the fact is—I—I didn't, you know."

Alina clasped her hands delightedly.

"Yes," ejaculated her lover solemnly, but he had no more notion why he said it or why Alina looked so pleased at his saying it than the man in the moon.

"Well, now," cried Alina, graciously, "I will tell you about it."

John Marton, with his arm still around his love's waist, closed his eyes and said piously to himself, "Thank heaven."

"I simply changed my mind."

John opened his eyes. "Yes?" Alina was not looking at him, but still with radiant concentration at Robson's letter. "It struck me that it would be such a joke, after all, to see whether you would know my writing without any clue. So," she wagged her head gaily, "I changed the name. I thought 'A Piece of Love' sounded rather silly. It does sound silly, doesn't it, Jack? 'A Piece of Love.'"

"Perhaps so," ejaculated John, faintly. "But whose is the 'Thing of Love,'" he wondered mistily, "and who can X be? Questions which, indeed, were never answered, for the simple reason that he forgot all about them."

"Yes, it does sound silly," Alina was meaning to say. "And, besides, the new title, 'A Human Heart,' occurred to me suddenly in the middle of the night, and I was simply delighted with it. So I changed the title, and then I thought it would be a good joke to strike out 'by X,' too, so I did. It was a good joke."

John stared helplessly at his love's smiling face.

A good joke! And he had gone through all that sea of misery for a good joke! "Oh, Alina! Oh, woman!" He made an effort and smiled.

"Yes," he whispered faintly, "oh, dear, yes." He even tried to laugh. Alina seemed to expect it.

"Well, that's all," said his love, smiling into his eyes.

John pulled himself together.

roof again, "for a bullet has almost the velocity when falling from a height as when shot from the gun. I remember once a girl, standing in her own yard, was severely wounded by a mysterious bullet. No one ever discovered where it came from, but four months later I was working on a church steeple not two hundred yards from her house, and around the openings where the pigeons go in and out I found the wood riddled with bullet holes."

"He has been climbing steeples and chimneys and other high places for more than twenty-five years. He began life as a sailor, going out from Newfoundland on a ship as a boy, drifting to this country in time to enlist for the Civil war, and at last taking up with his present occupation, in which he combines the trade of mason—for he has built the tops of many chimneys—of painter, of carpenter, of mechanic and worker in metal."

The most natural question to ask O'Neil was about fear; did he ever fear in high places? "Of course, I feel fear at times," he answered. "Fear is common to all mankind. Not to feel fear is not courage; to overcome fear is the true quality of courage. Not long ago Prof. Taussig, of Harvard, who is interested in the matter from a psychological standpoint, wrote to me a similar question. What I told him I will tell you."

"I divide the nerve force of a man into two parts—the impelling force and the restraining force—the same impelling force that causes a body of recruits at first to run under fire, and the restraining force that causes them to overcome for various reasons the first natural fear. So in climbing, one unafraid to it is by the natural impelling force of his nervous system afraid—afraid that his legs, his arms, his support will give way and plunge him down."

"Shakespeare, who touched on all human emotions, touched on this feeling of fear in high places, when in 'King Lear' he pictured Edward at the cliffs of Dover."

"The only way to get over the natural force is by some restraining force from either within or without. I remember once when a new boy at sea was ordered aloft by the mate he trembled with fear, and begged to be let out of it: 'Upon my soul, sir, I cannot go up there.' This was his first impelling repulse. But when the mate touched him with a rope's end and he

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